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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study explored the university experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) graduate and professional students at a West Coast research university. The study consisted of interviews with each participant, observations of students participating with other AI/AN students in 15 public events, and a meeting with the entire group. The eight participants were a diverse group, coming from different socioeconomic levels and different tribes, yet all had experienced academic isolation resulting from the influences of cultural incongruity, history, ethnicity, and community. One influence that did not emerge as important was racism. The alienation they experienced resulted not from the color of their skins but from their world views. AI/AN graduate and professional students responded to experiences of isolation and cultural incongruity by constructing a surrogate community on campus, which helped them define their ethnicity. The study unexpectedly highlighted a professional program, the school of medicine, that has made strides in understanding AI/AN perspectives. The school has course offerings tailored to the needs of students planning to serve the AI/AN population, a staff member whose purpose is to serve AI/AN needs, a student organization, and some faculty and administrators who are sensitive to differences in cultural perspectives and understand the strengths that AI/AN cultures can bring to the practice of medicine. (Contains 19 references.) (TD)

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Threads of Nations:

American Indian Graduate and Professional Students

Apanakhi Buckley

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of American Indian/Alaska Native experience in graduate and professional schools at a major West Coast research university. Eight participants were interviewed: four men and four women. Each were asked open-ended questions in one or two hour-long interview sessions. Participants were also observed in community settings. The study describes experiences with community, academic isolation, cultural incongruity, ethnicity, and racism.

Acknowledgment

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"I feel I am in exile," an American Indian medical school graduate confided. We had dined near the department where he had recently completed his studies. I had asked about his experiences at the large West Coast research university he had attended, and he responded by describing his sense of isolation. His perceptions were shared by other American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in graduate school departments and professional schools at the same university. "You know, there are no Indians to talk to, really, in our program," Sally, a masters student, told me. Later, though, she commented, "I'm used to it. This is my home. So, I don't really feel isolated."[1]

Passu, a graduate in health sciences, took that sense of isolation more seriously, "You have to have personal strength and you have to be able to connect with people who still respect you. You really have to do that. You can't be that isolated. It's a killer if you're isolated."

For Ariel, another graduate student, this sense of isolation was not only a profoundly personal experience, but a tribal experience as well. "My tribe itself is very mixed, because it's been scattered for so very long." She had been told as a child that the tribe she had come from was extinct. She said, "I knew my tribe, but that didn't matter, because there weren't any left, so there was another angle to this isolation that I really felt, you know. I thought, 'I'm Indian, but it doesn't matter, 'cause they're all gone.' I mean, how could I believe that? But I believed it 'cause that's what people told me, and that's what I read in books. They're gone."

Sally, Passu, and Ariel are among the American Indian and Alaska Native graduate and professional students who shared their stories with me at a major West Coast research university. I wanted to understand the university as they experienced it. I wanted to know about obstacles

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[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout the report.

they might face, and how they coped with those barriers. I wanted to understand the interactions which were meaningful to them in a university setting. To inquire into the experiences of AI/AN students and the ways in which those students constructed meanings from their experiences, I designed a study in the ethnographic tradition.

The eight participants in this study come from eight different tribes and hence, different cultures. They are a remarkably diverse group. Even those who had much in common responded to interview questions differently. Sally and Ariel were the same age. Both had children the same ages. Both were raised by white moms in the same socio-economic group, and yet their responses to questions about their experiences were different. Ariel spoke eloquently of longing for her ancestral home. She grieved for past genocide. Sally was pragmatic and concerned with present tribal issues. Yet, as different as Sally, Ariel, and the other participants in the study were, they constructed meaning from their experiences in similar ways.

The Research Problem

Numbers of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in graduate and professional programs are low. Meyers (1997) estimates that 2% of the AI/AN population enters graduate school (p. 63). I was drawn to a study of AI/AN graduate and professional students because of the need for more AI/AN people in professions where they are currently under-represented. Health care needs in AI/AN communities beg for more AI/AN doctors. Expensive legal battles have sometimes been abandoned because AI/AN communities could not afford good lawyers. Students need teachers who can reinforce in them a healthy ethnic identity. They need curricula which validates their own experiences. Jon Reyhner (1992), who has researched AI/AN school retention, notes:

> To build a strong positive identity, educators that the child interacts with in school need to reinforce and build on the cultural training and messages that the child has previously received. If educators give Indian children messages that conflict with what Indian parents and communities show and tell their children, the conflicting messages can confuse the children and create resistance to school (Reyhner, 1992, p. 39).

The list of professionals needed goes on because AI/AN communities face many economic and environmental challenges. Western education is not the only solution to those challenges, but educated AI/AN people who are willing to serve their communities can provide young people with role models, and can help solve the problems that affect their communities.

Despite clear needs, the ranks of AI/AN professionals are slow to fill. High AI/AN dropout rates from high school have reduced the numbers of students available for college entry. In a review of studies, Swisher and Hoisch (1992) found dropout rates ranging from 29% to 90% (p. 4). Meyers (1997) states that 17% of AI/AN students attend college, but only 4% graduate (p. 63). The 2% of AI/AN students who enter graduate and professional programs must be supported if the numbers of AI/AN professionals is to increase. Research about the experiences of AI/AN graduate and professional students can both illuminate the path for future students and support the endeavor of current students. No study, to date, has been published on the experiences of AI/AN graduate and professional students.

Conceptual Framework

The experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native students in graduate and professional programs are framed by several contexts. They are engaged in academic activities in the various schools and departments where they interact with their colleagues, instructors, and staff. They have friends, both off campus and on, and they have families. In addition, I found that they construct a surrogate community[2] of AI/AN people which spans campus and extends off campus. Although students in the Medical School at this large university tend not to interact with students outside of health sciences, there are some students who cross that boundary, and the medical students are especially active in engaging in community activities with AI/AN people off campus.

My conceptual framework is influenced by the research of Benjamin et al. (1993) who conducted a culturally sensitive study of American Indian college students using combined quantitative and quantitative methods. Benjamin et al. (1993) intentionally focused attention on "the successes of persisting American Indians" (p. 26). They (1993) noted that the ACT and SAT were poor predictors of success among AI/AN students, "In effect, an American Indian who had made good grades in high school, who graduated at the top of his or her high school class, and had done well on the ACT exam was just as likely to struggle with college academics, as was an American Indian who had measured deficiencies in these criteria" (p. 29). Cued by this anomaly, Benjamin et al. (1993) directed their research to discovering what was "operating among American Indians" which caused predictors which were reliable among mainstream students to fail with American Indian students. They subsequently interviewed 11 students and discovered influences on American Indian college experience which included: the importance of going home,

family support, and what they called "failing hard." To illustrate "failing hard" they quoted a participant, "I think they feel more hurt when they fail because it is sort of like everyone is counting on you" (p. 33). Because of the work of Benjamin et al. (1993), I looked for the influences of family and community among the AI/AN graduate and professional students I interviewed.

As the study progressed, I found other influences and returned to the literature. Students in this study are highly motivated, confirming Falk and Aitken's (1984) finding among college students that "personal motivation" helps students "persevere through difficult times" (p. 30). This motivation seems unrelated to income level. Three of the eight participants in my study are from low income homes. They mention experiences with parent alcoholism, Welfare, and migrant work as children and young adults, yet these students are highly successful in their fields. Two of those three are already published authors. This supports Pauline Rindone's (1988) finding that, "The assumption that low-income and low educational level of parents perpetuate low educational aspirations for their children does not hold true" (p. 6). Rindone (1988), in her survey of 200 Navajo college students, found, "we see that parents and family members were the driving force in their desire to achieve." One of the participants in my study emphasized the inspiration her mother had given her, despite a background of poverty and parent alcoholism.

Reyhner (1992) argues against the assumption that "dysfunctional Indian family and alcohol abuse" explain the high AI/AN college dropout rate (p. 38). He suggests alternate reasons for school-leaving among AI/AN students. "A recent compelling explanation as to why Indian students do poorly in school in the United States involves the cultural differences between Indian

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[2] The term "surrogate community" is the construct of Pam Oakes in her unpublished work on Hawaiian

cultures and the dominant Euro-American culture" (Reyhner, 1992, p. 38). Two of my participants, in response to a question about their college experiences, each mentioned dysfunctional families and alcohol abuse as important influences on their experiences before college. This negative family experience did not bar them from successfully entering graduate and professional schools. Each of the students commented on culture conflicts which were salient among their graduate and professional student experiences. Ariel, a graduate in the humanities, explains, "The way I know I'm Indian is from—after being in grad school for a year—figuring out that I don't see things the way the white people in this university see them."

Motivation

Sally is motivated by a desire to redress injustice of the past:

> The fact that these treaties were signed and they were promised 50% of the fish, they were promised 50% of the shellfish and these treaties were signed in the late 1800s and it took this long just to realize they had a right, so all the fish in between there, they lost, but we're not considering that. We're just considering what it's taking away from people today...now, wait a minute. These people have been dying and starving and this is a part of their life and I just don't get it.

Reflecting on how her desire for justice affects her experience at graduate school, Sally says:

> It's so empowering to *know*. It really is. I really enjoy knowing what I know, even though sometimes I'm not really happy about the results. I couldn't see my live any other way. I really couldn't. That's one thing I really try to enforce on my kids that knowing is the best thing.

Darby is also strongly motivated, but in his case, by current needs. He speaks of a sense of mission about his work in professional school. When I asked him to describe why he felt his

decision to abandon a lucrative career in order to enter a professional school was empowering, he said:

> "... empowering, in the sense that when you know what you're doing has moral weight to it, there's a power in knowing that what you're doing is the right thing to do and you don't have to wonder about it. It gives me, I mean, something you might feel a little shy in doing, you suddenly find yourself doing, like speaking or supporting something or doing something that you would have maybe imagined that you couldn't possibly do. It's just that when you have this sense of mission kind of thing that it makes you do things that, I think, you might not otherwise think that you were capable of doing.

Sally's sense of injustice and Darby's sense of mission are consistent with the research of Falk and Aitken (1984) who report finding that "personal motivation" helps students "persevere through difficult times" (p. 30). Darby has nearly completed his program and Sally has completed her masters and is embarking on the next stage of her program.

Academic Isolation

"I think there's a woman named Ruth who's finishing her Ph.D. in the department, and when she's done, I will be the only Indian in my graduate department, unless somebody comes in next year. So, I feel really alone and lonely," Ariel reflects. There are 113 American Indian/Alaska Native graduate and professional students in the university where this study was conducted, or 1.2% of the total population of graduate and professional students at this university. That number is in proportion to the population of AI/AN people in the state where the university is located. Although AI/AN students are not under-represented, their numbers are so few, one can easily understand how those students might feel isolated. Sally reports that a sympathetic professor in a natural resource department asked, "How do we keep Indian students here?"

She answered, "Well, how many Indians do you have there?"

"None."

"Oh, there's your first problem."

"Academic isolation" is the phrase I use to describe this situation in which students have few colleagues who share their culture. Academic isolation presents some specific challenges to American Indian/Alaska Native graduate and professional students. One challenge is the dearth of course offerings which apply to their career needs. Students who want to be prepared to teach the art, literature, music, or dance of their cultures are disappointed to find that no one in their departments has the expertise to give them guidance. Ariel asks, "When I graduate, who's going to hire me when they could hire someone from a university which trains their students in my field?" For Ariel, there is one university which offers training in her area, but she would have to uproot her family and move two thousand miles away to get there.

Sally, in a professional program, responds with resilience, "A lot of the professors whom I approach and ask questions concerning tribal issues, they don't have a clue. It's really hard that way, but it helps you to be more resourceful finding the people you need to talk to, whether they be in academia or they be out in the professional world or they're on your tribal lands....There's a lot of people—a lot of Indian people who are getting concerned about it and wanting to get that education so they can go in and start running these agencies or working in these agencies to find a good answer for the people."

Darby, a recent graduate from a professional program, describes a contrasting situation. He feels that his training prepared him well to serve indigenous communities. He describes a set of courses he took which are gauged to meet the needs of those in his field who wish to serve

AI/AN people, "I came to this university specifically because of the things they were offering both the strength in my field and the strong support and background they have, the history, I should say, of providing a supportive environment for Native American students."

The contrasts among participants' reports suggests that at one university different programs may have strengths or weaknesses in serving the AI/AN population. As we have seen above, one area in which programs may shine or falter is in their course offerings. Darby's feedback suggests another area: faculty support of AI/AN students.

Faculty support, or the lack of it, is also related to academic isolation because faculty may be unfamiliar with indigenous perspectives and, therefore, unable to support students' ideas. "You know," said Ariel, "He clearly thought that I should be familiar with the theory, but he gave me zero credit for the theory with which I am familiar: the Native American theory." On one occasion when Ariel had been stung by faculty comments, and frustrated because her colleagues had not understood her point of view, another woman of color had supported her, "We sat on this bench and I started telling her these feelings I was having about that class and how invisible I felt, and how invisible I felt my people's culture was in that class....I was thinking of dropping out....She was so sweet. She was like, "No, I'm going to keep my eye on you....Here's my phone number. You call me on a bad day."

Academic isolation can create challenges for Native American students including the following:

- Paucity of course offerings which will adequately prepare them for their career choices
- Faculty who are unfamiliar with tribal issues and perspectives

Faculty Support

The importance of caring faculty was explored by Dehyle (1992) when she studied Dine' and Ute secondary school leavers. Dehyle (1992) found, "almost half of the Navajo and Ute school leavers felt their teachers did not care about them"(p. 30). I thought of Dehyle's work as I designed this study. Dehyle studied school leavers, while I am studying students who persisted into graduate school. I anticipated that the experiences of my participants would be different from those who had left school. I wondered if exposure to caring teachers and mentors might be one of those differences. As a result, in the semi-structured interviews, I included the prompt, "Please tell me about people who are important to your graduate [or professional program] experience." Five of the seven participants mentioned instructors whose support had been crucial to their experience in graduate school.

Participants spoke in glowing terms of the support they had received from faculty. Joanna was the only participant who didn't mention positive interactions with faculty. She commented, "I think I had a couple of professors who did not believe in me and it just felt really horrible."

Darby was mentored by an American Indian faculty member, "He is a very instrumental person in making me feel at home and giving me guidance....He gave me the names of the key people whom I work with every day now....and these are people that are good friends and good professional colleagues of mine. Those little things that kind of set things in motion are really invaluable."

Ariel talks about her advisor, "Steve is a guy who, right from the start, without even knowing me, went to bat. He read a paper I had sent in and he called me up and said, 'We need to get more people like you in the academy.'"

Sally felt that colleagues were critical of her because she had entered the university under the Educational Opportunity Program. She went to a professor to discuss her concerns. He asked, "Well, why are you worried about that?"

"Because I'm worried that they just let me in because I'm Indian," Sally replied, "I'm not happy with that, and I don't accept it. I want to come into this school because I'm smart enough."

"You're still here, aren't you?"

While several of these participants had unfortunate experiences with faculty, all but one reported positive experiences about which they felt strongly. Support from faculty was not the only kind of support which participants described. As mentioned earlier, Ariel spoke gratefully of another woman of color who comforted her. Sally, too, had anecdotes of colleagues—men and women of color—on whose support she had relied. She told me about one student who is already in the program to which she has just been accepted, "He's the one who called me to encourage me to accept. I said, 'I already did.'

"He said, 'This could be a short conversation.'"

Despite academic isolation, participants report being supported in crucial ways, so academic isolation alone cannot account for experiences which seemed so intense one participant described his loneliness as "exile." From what do the participants feel exiled?

Community

"Powwow is instant formation of community—did you feel that? Did you feel a part of what was going on?" I had attended the powwow, partly because I like powwows. But I had worked there hoping to recruit participants to my study. However, as I watched American Indian and Alaska Native graduates and undergraduates go without sleep for three days in order to keep

the powwow running smoothly, I began to believe that something was going on which I hadn't understood before.

In the first week of data collection, Passu had told her story in a way which made me feel community must be very important to her:

> Jeri: You mentioned distance from home before. How does that play into graduate experience?
> Passu: It's the lack of time. And the inability to finance yourself to get out and visit your relatives who are a hundred miles away.
> Jeri: How important was that to you?
> Passu: Life and death.

I began to try to understand what community means to AI/AN students on this campus. I redesigned the study to look at the following questions:

- How do AI/AN graduate and professional students construct community?
- How important is community to AI/AN graduate and professional students?
- With whom do AI/AN graduate and professional students construct community?

Considering that the AI/AN graduate and professional community is small, I figured they wouldn't meet often in the six weeks I had set aside for data collection and the research burden would not be substantially increased. In eight weeks, I observed AI/AN graduate and professional students interacting on 17 occasions: four student meetings, three poetry readings, two powwows (one on this campus, and one which took place at a neighboring campus, but which was also attended by our students), a party, a lecture, a ceremony, a workshop, a fund-raiser, a work party, an American Indian film festival, and a concert of a popular AI/AN band. The large number of community activities suggests that AI/AN students do try to get together with others who share their ethnicity. I argue that in the process of getting together they are

attempting to construct a community. This community may not serve their needs as well as, or in the same ways as, communities they call home, but this community does function to serve some of their needs, for instance, by providing colleagues and role models to its members. In the ensuing paragraphs, I will present evidence that this community enhances the experiences of AI/AN students who participate in it.

These occasions were not attended exclusively by AI/AN graduate or professional students. If an AI/AN poet was going to conduct a reading, for instance, I went just guessing that other AI/AN students would show up. I was not disappointed, because approximately 25% of the people attending the events I listed, except the film festival, were AI/AN students, at least some of whom were graduates or professional students.

The student groups are well-connected with community groups. In one group meeting which lasted 1 ½ hours I noted that the members referred to nine other groups which serve AI/AN populations including one out-of-state group. Some of them attended the meetings and cultural activities of those off-campus groups.

Looking at the focus of student activities indicates with whom AI/AN students construct community. One focus of the student group activities is providing services to needy people in the community surrounding campus. Concern for AI/AN homeless in the surrounding community is apparent from the discussion from which I excerpted these comments.

> I mean a lot of these guys just need clean socks. These guys know if they go to sleep on the street and take their shoes off, someone will steal their shoes, so they just never take off their shoes. So they've worn through their socks and they've got foot ulcers.

> There's a lot of young Native American women who are basically homeless. Street kids get left out a lot. I mean street kids tend to be like the last population anybody thinks about and they're a population we have to reach. They're for future and if we can reach

> them by whatever means to sort of give them a vision that there's other places they can go and things they can do—part of the problem is that's the sort of cycle of hopelessness. Once they're actually out on the street, it's even worse. I mean, being out on the street is almost worse than being in a bad situation, because in a bad situation, at least you're in your own house and it's a bad situation. Being on the street is even worse than being in a bad situation because you have no place to be.

The group in which this discussion occurred seeks to provide some clothing, food, and health care to AI/AN homeless people among other activities. These graduate and professional students understand homelessness with empathy. For some, that may have been a result of personal experience with poverty. Ariel commented, "You can't get away from class when you're Native American...because we are the poorest group.

Another activity to which they have devoted considerable effort is serving a local high school. The president of the student group explained the situation as follows:

> What it comes down to is she is still doing exams and pap exams and pelvics on gym mats there and totally thrilled and elated by the idea that somebody might be able to try to either raise funds or try to do a letter-writing campaign to find somebody to donate an exam table with stirrups.

These students appear to define community broadly, seeing themselves as part of a community which extends beyond campus, into the city around this university and even to reservations distant from the city as evidenced by the following examples.

Members of another student group collected clothing to send to reservations hard hit during the blizzards of the last winter, and by the ensuing floods. The effort was orchestrated by e-mail and began with the message, "We are gathering clothes to donate to Indian communities in North Dakota that got hit by the big floods."

Buffalo slaughter in Montana was a concern for some of the students during the winter and spring of 1997. As buffalo strayed from Yellowstone National Park, Montana state officials killed them if they were judged to affect the health of the cattle industry. One professional student wrote, tongue-in-cheek, to the AI/AN e-mail bulletin board:

> Why don't we organize a group of Indians to round up the stray Buffalo and herd 'em into cattle trucks, pick-up trucks, and horse trailers and then take them away from the park to join a reservation herd?....Heck, why don't we just go into the park and round up all the buffalo there, too?

For some, these out-of-state communities were home. Others were concerned about out-of-state communities even when they were not home. At the meeting of another student group, conversation ranged from the Badlands of South Dakota to an up-coming puberty ceremony in a Southwest tribe. Neither were places where the members had lived, but talk of what they call "Indian Country" seemed important to the members.

An aspect of AI/AN community on campus is that students meet at events which are not specific to their interest areas. One of the graduates organized a series of lectures including a poetry reading by a well-respected AI/AN poet. This poet deals with difficult issues like child sexual abuse and poverty. She writes about Indian ethnicity and lesbian love. I attended one of her readings. When I arrived, I scanned the group to see who had gathered to hear her. I was surprised to see a pre-med student enter. Proud of his identity, this young man has his tribe name tattooed on his arm. Six foot six inches tall, he sat on the floor and crouched to make himself as small as the rest of the audience most of whom were women. After the reading, I teased him, "I didn't know you were a feminist."

I didn't know you were a feminist."

He answered, "I know the poet. I don't know if I'm a feminist. I just think that women and men can do the same things, that's all."

"Well, that makes you a feminist."

"Then there are a lot of people I know who are feminists and don't know it."

"And poetry. I never pictured you as a poetry reader."

"Well, I just had some time—there wasn't a First Nations meeting that day because of the reading, so I knew some of the people who were going, so I went."

This unexpected meeting suggested that the young man had attended the poetry meeting as much to be around people he knew who shared his ethnicity as to enjoy the excellent poetry.

These initial observations point to three propositions about AI/AN community:

- AI/AN graduate and professional students seek to meet with people who share their own ethnicity.
- AI/AN graduate and professional students extend their community boundaries to interact with urban and reservation communities off campus.
- Community is important to AI/AN students in ways which may be unique to them.

To test the last proposition, I recruited another AI/AN participant who holds a position of respect in the community. His position allows him to observe the community from the inside and he is trained for social observation. He explained:

> You have to belong to a community. That pretty much constructs your own identity in various levels: cultural levels, gender levels.... It's where you come from that gives you a sense of purpose. It gives you a sense of place.

He explained the importance to AI/AN people of "giving back," which might account, in part, for the efforts of student groups to serve urban and reservation needs:

> I have to give back to the place I came from, because like now, as soon as I'm through, I'm going to go back to the reservation. That is where I came from. I have to give back to the community. I have a strong cultural sense of reciprocity. It's something that I would actually do. It's not something we talk about.

For the AI/AN graduate and professional students I observed, community extended beyond the borders of campus. Community activities take place in the get-togethers that happen on campus and in off-campus events at which AI/AN people meet in the community at large. To refer to the out-of-state groups with whom they interact as community is a bit of a reach, since in many cases, they did not know those people. The term they themselves use, "Indian Country," is probably a better descriptor. This study was only long enough to begin to sketch how AI/AN graduate and professional students reconstruct community when most of them are away from their home communities. The study does suggest, however, that those surrogate communities[3], although they may be rudimentary, are constructed. It also suggests a theoretical framework for examining those communities.

DISCUSSION

When I began this study, I saw the contexts in which AI/AN graduate and professional students experience the university only in contemporary terms. I did not foresee any influences on the students beyond their communities and families, their friends and colleagues, their personalities, their motivation, events in their lives, their finances, and institutional support or

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cultures in mainland U. S. Oakes investigates what *ohana* looks like when Hawaiian natives leave home.

barriers. That seemed like a long enough list to me. In the course of this study, I have begun to realize how important historical context is to AI/AN experience.

That sense of the past was illustrated for me in the words of my participants. Passu used historical terms to explain the frustration of not being understood, "All your relatives and all your historical selves, all the family that you've come from, has had to explain themselves constantly to non-Natives for 500 years."

During the process of gaining consent to study one of the student groups, I explained that one of my goals was to explain to people in the mainstream culture that, "There are other ways of thinking about things—different from the ways they think about them." Several of the members simultaneously indicated that I was unlikely to be successful. One person articulated the group's skepticism, "We've been trying for 500 years. If we haven't done it, it's not likely you will."

Five hundred years of occupation seemed to be present in the awareness of AI/AN graduate and professional students. A few participants spoke of specific historic events. I began my interview with Ariel, as I did with the other participants by asking the open-ended question, "Tell me about your graduate school experience. What has worked for you?"

Ariel laid the groundwork for explaining her current experience by explaining her family background and her tribal background, "After the Missions were secularized, people stopped identifying as Indian because there was mass genocide, mass murder. You could shoot an Indian on sight in California during the Gold Rush and nobody would flicker an eyelash." To explain her current graduate experience, Ariel referred to the history of her tribe.

Participants also spoke of recent historic events. When I asked Sally about faculty support, she explained that faculty did not understand the issues which were important to her. For example, Sally had followed the history of fishing rights:

> You think about the Boldt Decision and the shellfish issue and the fish issue and the fact that these treaties were signed and they were promised 50% of the fish, they were promised 50% of shellfish and these treaties were signed in the late 1800s and it took this long just to recognize that they had a right, so all the fish in between there, they lost, but we're not considering that. We're just considering what it's taking away from people today. You know, on the opposite side, I'm thinking, "Now, wait a minute. These people have been dying and starving and this a part of their life and I just don't get it."

American Indian/Alaska Native students attending graduate school at the end of the 20th century live in a time when AI/AN communities are responding to historic events of the preceding century. These events form the historical context in which AI/AN students function today. In this study, I did not examine which historical influences were most salient for AI/AN graduate and professional students. Among the possible influences are the histories of: boarding schools, tribal terminations, the sometimes violent political activities of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and money generated by casinos.

Conclusion

This study was not designed to evaluate departments, but two of the categories which emerged from analysis told something of the programs the students were attending. Those categories were "faculty support" and "academic isolation." One of the programs from which participants were selected offered experiences which were remarkably more valuable to the students in that program than those academic experiences reported by students in other programs.

The success of that program bears mention here. The program was that offered by the School of Medicine. The particular academic experiences the school offered were:

- course offerings tailored to meet the needs of students whose career goals involved serving the AI/AN population
- a staff member whose purpose was to serve AI/AN needs
- a student organization
- sensitivity on the part of some faculty and administrators to:

  —differences in cultural perspectives among mainstream cultures and AI/AN cultures

  —understanding of the strengths which AI/AN cultures can bring to the practice of medicine

Although most departments and professional programs are not well enough funded to afford a special staff position, understanding of the strengths AI/AN cultures may bring to any academic field is not a budget item. Cultivating such understanding requires the personal commitment of faculty and staff who deal with AI/AN students.

American Indian/Alaska Native students in graduate and professional schools are successful students. Their experiences may illuminate the path for students who follow them. The successful completion of their programs is important, not only to them personally, but to their communities, because these graduates can help their communities find voice, insist on their cultures, and face challenges.

Appendix: Methods

I studied AI/AN graduates, medical students, and law students, and public affairs students at a major West Coast research university. As I began designing a study of American Indian/Alaska Native graduate and professional students, I was concerned with the following considerations:

- The population of graduate and professional students is small.
- Since there is no body of literature on AI/AN graduate and professional students, this study cannot be structured based on previous findings.
- I wanted to gain as deep an understanding of their experience as I can.
- I wanted to understand their experience from their perspective, rather than from an outside predetermined point of view.

These considerations were best addressed with a qualitative design. Since I was interested in the experiences of AI/AN people and in the meanings they perceive in those experiences, a study in the ethnographic tradition made the most sense.

To initiate contacts, I used faculty recommendations, personal contacts, and an e-mail bulletin board to which many of them subscribed. I had only a vague idea of what American Indian/Alaska Native community on the campus was. The only conscious tactics I used to gain entry and introduce myself to AI/AN students I hadn't met were:

- to keep an eye out for events which might attract AI/AN students and attend

• to respond when notices were posted to the e-mail bulletin board requesting volunteers and to assist in various activities. I attempted to make myself quietly visible so that people would have a chance to check me out before I asked them to participate.

I interviewed eight students: four women and four men from professional programs and across four graduate departments, including at least one in each of the natural sciences, behavioral sciences, and humanities. I conducted one or two interviews using open-ended questions with each participant. Each interview took approximately an hour.

As I transcribed the initial interviews, I noticed that several of the participants had mentioned the importance of community to their graduate and professional experience, so I adjusted the design of my study to include community observations. Data from community observations included a tape transcription, field notes, printed public e-mail messages, and notes in my research log.

I analyzed my data in the following process:

1. I coded each interview line-by-line.

2. Themes emerged from the coding as some experiences seemed related to each other. I chose labels to categorize those themes.

3. Using the category labels, I recoded the data, printing sections of the transcripts which best articulated the experiences within those categories.

4. I filed each category separately. Thus each file contained quotations from several different interviews.

5. I examined each file to better interpret the experiences described in each category. As I articulated my findings, I returned to the data to look for confirming and disconfirming examples.

I was not objective about my participants, so I took extra care to study the data methodically. As I posed propositions to interpret my findings, I returned to the participants to verify my understanding. I also sought out other people in the community as a check to test my observations. When my observations were disconfirmed by outside observers, the participants themselves, or further examination of the data, I modified them and re-tested them, or threw them out.

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